

The test of the third text

One way to think about preaching is through the framework of three “texts”—the Biblical *text*, the listeners’ *context*, and the *subtext* of your own heart. Most of this book has dealt with the text (preaching the Word) and the context (preaching to the heart). As we’ve seen in this chapter, your gifts alone can lead you a long way toward creating sermons that deal properly with the Word and understand the heart of the listener. But one excellent test of your spiritual maturity—of the presence of the Holy Spirit in your preaching—is to examine the subtext of your preaching.

The subtext is the message under your message. It is the real, intended (conscious or unconscious) meaning of a message, which is deeper than the surface meanings of the words. For example, the statement “No, I’m just fine” may have the subtext of “I have no concerns, please proceed with what you are doing” but it may also mean, “I have a concern but I don’t want to have to say it directly.” Your tone of voice, facial expression, postures, and gestures will do a lot of work to signal your real goal to the audience, and that goal can hijack the communication regardless of your stated message.ⁱ The following subtexts are not the only ones that appear in preaching, but they are the most typical.

A subtext of reinforcement. One kind of subtext is “aren’t we great?” This is “ritual” and “stylized” communication, which is used to reinforce boundaries

and contribute to a sense of security and belonging. First, it is “ritual” in the sense that its main goal is to furnish a sense of self-reinforcement to a group. When ritual is the subtext of preaching, the real message is: “We are gathered here with people of like mind to share this presentation with each other as a symbol of our common commitment to each other, to God, and to this organization. We are the kind of people who believe these kinds of things and live in this kind of way.”ⁱⁱ Of course, it is a good goal to give a community a sense of identity and belonging. But if that becomes the main goal, the true subtext, it will destroy the sermon’s ability to change lives. It will turn us not into Christ-like but into smug people.

Second, this is “stylized” in that real information transfer is not asked for or offered. The most common example of “stylized” communication in our culture is the interchange, “how are you?” and “I’m fine.” Ordinarily that is not meant to be a real exchange of information. Rather, the subtext is “I’m friendly to you and you are friendly to me.” When a doctor asks the same question in a hospital, however, it is not stylized—real information is requested and given. If, in a greeting situation, the receptor gives a long inventory of physical condition, he has probably misunderstood the sender!

Many churches are committed to this reinforcement subtext, which functions as a kind of *gatekeeping*. These churches do not want to be challenged or convicted or stretched. They may feel they are “standing up for the truth”; but as they are addressing insiders who already

believe, there is scarcely anyone being engaged, let alone confronted, with that truth. The motive and focus of such communication is to build up and protect insiders from those outside the boundary. The main skill needed to operate in this subtext is a mastery of the tribal dialect.

A subtext of performance. A second kind of subtext is “aren’t I great?” The speaker is seeking to exhibit his or her skills and promote the products of the church. The message is: “Don’t you think I’m a great preacher, and don’t you think this is a great church? Don’t you want to come back, bring friends, and give money?” The performance goal is: “Look at me; listen to me. See how worthy I am of your respect.” The problem here is that every communicator *does* need to establish credibility with an audience, but if this becomes the main goal, it destroys the sermon’s ability to change lives. Self-conscious preachers draw attention to themselves, not to Christ. At some level, the audience will realize that the speaker is not really concerned about them. He or she is concerned with delivering the message well and getting on their good side.

This subtext does rely on real teaching and information transmission, as the goal is to get across a body of information that the hearers do not have. However, the reason for the teaching is mainly to win people over to the organization or the church as an institution.

This performance subtext is fundamentally a form of *selling*. This kind of communication is more directed

to newcomers and outsiders—but the motive is still, indirectly, for the benefit of the insiders (to grow their church). The communicator needs far more rhetorical skills for arousing and keeping interest than in the first kind of communication.

A subtext of training. A third kind of subtext is “isn’t this truth great?” The goal is to increase the knowledge of the receiver, so that they can live in a desired way. The subtext is: “news you can use.” Like the performance subtext, this relies heavily on real information transfer—though its aim is less selfish.

Many churches are committed to this training or *teaching* subtext. People in these churches want to be shown new things they have not seen before. They would like to be inspired, but they consider that less central. They want to be fed “solid food.” The focus of such communication is still completely on insiders (for non-Christians can’t be changed until they believe). The skills needed here are research and communication abilities.

A subtext of worship. A last kind of subtext is “isn’t Christ great?” This is the most complex and complete of all, and it takes the most skill. It aims beyond information, beyond the capturing of the imagination, and even beyond behavior change, to the goal of changing what our heart most sets its affections on. The message: “Look at how Christ is so much grander and more wonderful than you thought! Don’t you see that all your problems stem from this?”

I believe all churches should be committed to this

worship subtext, which I believe is the heart of true *preaching*. The focus is on both insiders and outsiders (since you are calling both to worship Christ rather than those things they are worshipping instead), and the motive is to build up everyone. This kind of subtext requires research, rhetorical, and contextualization abilities.

There is no way to convey this right and true subtext through technique; it comes down to your spiritual life as a preacher. Are you “sensing Christ on your heart” as you preach? Are you, in a way, meditating and contemplating him during the very act of preaching? Are you actually praising him as you talk about his praiseworthiness? Are you actually humbling yourself as you talk of your sin? The answer will be very evident to any attentive listener. And these things will only happen in your preaching if you are regularly cultivating them during routine prayer and meditation, beyond the task of sermon preparation.

In short, the temptation will be to let the pulpit drive you to the Word, but instead you must let the Word drive you to the pulpit. Prepare the preacher more than you prepare the sermon.

ⁱ See Derek Thomas’ list of subtexts (though he doesn’t call them that) in his essay “Expository Preaching” in *Feed My Sheep: A Passionate Plea for Preaching*, Soli Deo Publications, 2002, pp.80-83. They are described hilariously, and there is much overlap with what I am saying in this section.

ⁱⁱ Charles Kraft, *Communication Theory for Christian Witness* (Abingdon, 1983) p. 78.